

# The Tale of Jack Sheppard: Narration

Welcome to this performance of *Escape was on Everyone's Mind – The Tale of Jack Sheppard*. It is part of a tour, supported using public funding by the National Lottery through Arts Council England. On this tour we are working with Bristol Radical History Group and other local history groups to hold post show discussions; and also with the Woodcraft Folk, with whom we are running puppetry workshops.

Before we begin, a word from our narrator:

There are several songs in the show. It's worth paying attention to the lyrics, as they tell parts of the story [all the song lyrics are in this document]. There are a couple of songs to sing along with. It should be obvious which ones.

We'd also like to encourage cheering and booing, and maybe a bit of supportive heckling. Some of you have paper balls, to throw at the judges. I'll throw the first one, and that's your cue to throw the rest.

Some people have beer mugs, or pub signs. At one point in the show there will be a pub crawl: when that happens we'd like you to hold up the pub signs, and raise your glasses.

And now, on with the show.

Ladies and gentlemen, rebels and riff-raff, we present to you "Escape was on Everyone's Mind: The Tale of Jack Sheppard," legendary jailbreaker and hero of the people.

We will first introduce to you some of the chief actors of our play:

The English Justice System: protector of the rich, guardian of private property, scourge of the ordinary people.

Its ally, the Established Church: Peddling the morality of hard work, and knowing your place. Pie in the sky when you die (that's a lie)

The good people of London – bakers, weavers, carpenters, porters, pickpockets, shipwrights, spinners, haberdashers, wigmakers...  
...and the idle gentry.

And among these good people is the estimable Edgeworth Bess: queen of the Black Lion Inn, skilled thief, receiver of stolen goods, and sometimes a good friend of our hero.

Next, a snake in the people's midst: a man of many faces, with fingers in many pies – Jonathan Wild, the Thieftaker General

And finally the hero of our tale:

The jailbreaker extraordinaire....

The wonder of all London...

The notorious rogue, shackled and chained at last behind the stone walls of Newgate Prison

– Jaaaack Sheppard!

### **Door opens**

Jack Sheppard!??

How did an ordinary London lad become a master of escape, the name on everyone's lips, whose fame spread across oceans?

Jack was from Spitalfields, centre of the silk trade, home of the rebellious weavers. He was born there in 1702 when the Bank of England was just 6 years old.

And what a time and place. London, the new centre of world trade. **[Start Portrait Song]** City of merchants, city of bankers and speculators. City of vast wealth, built and fashioned by the hands of the many. The world's riches flowing in, straight to the hands of the few. People a bit like this:

### **Ship song**

#### **After song, small Jack appears on sign**

One of the first to receive this new education was our own Jack.

His father died young, his mother found work as a servant and couldn't keep her son...

#### **Jack is tipped into workhouse**

#### **Jack jumps around**

#### **Big hand puts him in his place**

Long hours spent learning the true value of tedious labour – making a profit for the benefactors.

Hours spent learning the pleasures of conspiracy, the meanings of locks, the craft of survival.

#### **Footsteps**

#### **Hand puts Jack onto saw**

**Song:** *In Spitalfields I was born*

*There in the workhouse I was kept in scorn*

*To a carpenter was apprentice made*

*But I'll always be,*

*Always be a roving blade*

**A carpenter's workshop. Jack works with tools**

Jack was ingenious at his trade, and knew his business very early in his time. He understood well the workings of buildings. Wood and metal bent to his will. But such skills were no guarantee of work, or food on the table. The ground was shifting under people's feet.

**Bell tolls**

Mrs. Weaver is to be hanged under the Riot Act of 1715: for protesting falling prices that she claims left her family hungry.

**Bell tolls**

These tailors are sentenced to be transported to the colonies for 14 years' hard labour: for forming a union to demand better pay and shorter hours, under the transportation act of 1719 and the combination act of 1721

**Bell tolls**

John Smith, an apprentice boy, is to be hanged under the Waltham Black Act of 1723: for going out with the poachers when there was no work to be had.

**Jack looks out of window: leaves**

Weary of the yoke of servitude, Jack left his apprenticeship never to return *slight pause* and roamed free on the streets of London.

**Tune: Oranges and Lemons****City opens up****Jack moves through London & arrives at pub**

He soon found companions among the outlaws of Drury Lane

**Jack & Bess watch house.****Mutter of rich folk in house: dining; counting money****Jack and Bess rob house, then disappear.**

Jack's thieving career then began in earnest.

In London at this time there was not a police force as we know it now. Fortunes could be made by shrewd operators offering private services. One of the more successful, was Jonathan Wild.

**Jonathan Wild enters**

Jonathan Wild, Master of Thieves. Training them, directing them, disposing of their loot.

Jonathan Wild, Recoverer of Stolen Goods. Provider of services to the propertied.

Jonathan Wild, Thieftaker General. Bounty hunter and friend of the law.

### **Jonathan Wild rubs his hands**

Jonathan Wild, getting very rich off everybody. His warehouses full of stolen treasures. His ships “trading” to Holland and France. The rich eating out of his hands, half the thieves of London in his pay, and desperate for his favour *slight pause* But not all of them.

### **Jack & Bess snub Wild; exit**

*Song: I Robbed Lord Swindle, I declare  
And Lady Pluckwell of Grosvenor Square  
I shut the shutters and bid them goodnight  
And away I went  
Away I went to my heart's delight*

### **Jack enters with stolen spoons. He is caught and pulled into building**

Jack was confined to the parish lockup.

### **Sounds of banging. Jack escapes**

### **Signs: “Three hours and he was out” etc**

*Song: To Oxford Street I went one day  
To Oxford Street where the gentry play  
But Wild's men did me there pursue  
And I must flee  
I must flee from his cursed crew*

### **Rich people shopping**

### **Jack appears; steals watch.**

### **“Thief! Thief!” Rich rush off**

Jonathan Wild smelled bounty money - and the gratitude of the rich, as Jack was becoming an annoyance.

### **Jonathan Wild brings in runner.**

### **Runner chases Jack, loses him**

### **Jonathan Wild appears by pub:**

Foiled thus far, Wild turned to other means to track Jack down

**Jonathan Wild menaces Bess.**

**Signs: "Jack! Watch your back!"**

Wild's men found Jack in a chamber in Rosemary Lane. He was retaken and confined to Newgate, to await trial.

Out in the streets, Bartholomew Fair began

**Bess frees Jack with crowd's help**

**They scarper**

**News-seller:** " Jack Sheppard escaped... Marvellous... Miraculous... Lock up your goods..."

In a matter of weeks, both Jack and Bess were caught, and confined in Clerkenwell. It didn't hold them for long. The jailers preserved the broken chains and bars, as they thought this escape the most miraculous yet performed in England.

Newly escaped, Jack had three months of liberty. He robbed on the highway. He robbed in Hampstead. He stopped coaches. He broke into shops. He lived the high life.

**Jack does the tightrope on line of stolen goods**

**Big hand pushes him: he falls**

**Song** *In bonds and chains I was tied  
Before the judge I was for my life tried  
And the rich men said this will not do  
Our gold and silver  
Our gold and silver he's taken too*

**Jack in court. Judges enter**

Jack told the judges that he had never had an opportunity to earn his bread in an honest way. He refused to wheedle on any who had assisted him. He was reprimanded for profanity. He offered to demonstrate his art: if they would put handcuffs on him, he would take them off before their eyes.

**Poor people cheer Jack.**

**Judges:** "Silence in court! Valuation of stolen property to commence"

**Judges pass death sentence. "Take the prisoner to Newgate!"**

**Audience throw paper balls at judges**

**Poor and rich shout at each other**

**Song** *In Newgate Prison here I lie*  
*They mean to take me out and see me die*  
*But for their purpose I was not made*  
*I'll always be*  
*I'll always be a roving blade*

#### **Jack in prison cell**

Now began the heady days of his fame. His deeds became the discourse of the whole nation. The common people when mad about him. It was a week of the greatest idleness that had been known in London. Porters were unavailable. Butchers, shoemakers and barbers left their work and crowded the alehouses.

#### **Woman brings Jack beer**

#### **Rich people look through prison window**

The great, the fast, the strong, the talented and the beautiful sought his company in Newgate and, if they could pay the keeper, they got it.

#### **Rich people enter and look at Jack**

Jack's exploits made him the subject of artists, writers and journalists. Daniel Defoe became his ghost writer and the king's own artist came to paint his portrait in Newgate.

#### **Jack poses for artist**

Jack shared with the visitors his opinions on the criminal justice system...  
 the economy...  
 and his own line of work.

#### **Rich leave, scandalised**

#### **Priest enters**

Jack shared with the clergy his views on theology

#### **Jailer checks chains**

They had constructed new legirons and added handcuffs. Never had he been so thoroughly secured.

#### **Jack gets out of chains**

#### **He disappears up chimney**

He ascended to the room above, whose door had not been opened in seven years. *Pause*  
 He found here a large nail...

#### **Hand appears**

He found himself in the chapel.

**Large face at window**

Here he broke off a spike from a railing which helped him wrench the bolt-box off the next door.

**Jack crosses on ledge**

Working in the pitch black, drawing on all his craft, he passed through three more doors, all bolted on the other side.

**Jack crouches in top window**

A final door gave him access to the leads of the roof

**Jack stands on roof**

The city lay below him. He knew that the smallest accident would spoil the whole workmanship. What he needed now was a long enough rope. Or... a blanket.

**Jack gets blanket****He swings down and runs off**

He was once more, contrary to his expectation and that of all London, a free man.

He tore his coat and stockings, so as a beggar-fellow he visited an ale house to hear the talk. The next day he heard the ballads about him. He robbed a clothes-dealer in Monmouth Street to attire himself for the days ahead.

**Jack appears in disguises; leaves.****Crowd go off, gossiping**

Next, Jack robbed a pawnshop in Drury lane to furnish himself with a fine suit, a silver sword, diamonds, watches and other pretty little toys.

**Jack and Bess arrive in carriage****Drinking song**

*We welcome our Jack to the Black Lion Inn  
To join his good friends for a bottle of gin  
Decked out in the spoil of his last robbery  
Raise a glass to our hero, Jack Sheppard is free*

*Chorus:*

*Jack Sheppard is free, Jack Sheppard is free  
Raise a glass to our hero, Jack Sheppard is free*

*We're drinking to Jack over here at the Crown  
As he rides with our Bess on a tour of the town  
Past prison and workhouse in his finery  
Raise a glass to our hero, Jack Sheppard is free*

*Chorus*

**Carriage is passed round audience**

*The sailors and the porters who drink at the Ship  
Make a toast to the man who gives jailers the slip  
He's taunting the gentry with his liberty  
Raise a glass to our hero, Jack Sheppard is free*

*Chorus*

*The smiths and the carpenters at the White Hart  
Are praising his skill and admiring his art  
Never was prison broken with such mastery  
Raise a glass to our hero, Jack Sheppard is free*

*Chorus*

*There's cheering from the rebels at the old Weavers' Arms  
For the wild life he lives keeps the rich in alarm  
When he might have been starving obediently  
Raise a glass to our hero, Jack Sheppard is free*

*Chorus*

**Carriage goes back to stage**

*The night's growing late as he stops at the Star  
And he's taking a bow as the crowd shout hurrah!  
And we all drink to freedom so triumphantly  
Raise a glass to our hero, Jack Sheppard is free*

*Chorus*

**Eyes watching**

**Jonathan Wild grabs Jack**

**Drumming**

**Jack enters in wagon with priest**

**Crowd gathers**

200,000, a third of the people of London, flocked to the gallows as the city ground to a halt.

People gave Jack drinks, and threw flowers.

### **Carriage moves; clouds pass**

### **Big hand appears**

Sheppard was searched for any small means of escape that his guards might have missed.

### **Bell tolls as noose is put on Jack**

Jack was hanged on the 16<sup>th</sup> of November, 1724.

### **Jack dropped to floor and crowd pick him up**

### **Song**

*And when I'm dead and go to my grave  
A flashy funeral then let me have  
With six bold robbers to carry me  
Oh give them broadswords  
Give them swords and sweet liberty*

### **Posters strung across London**

Come and see the show! Back for another month by popular demand...

Sheppard lives on, in songs, in plays, in broadsheets.

His story is told in the mills of Manchester, at gypsy fires the length of England, in the camps of American Revolutionaries, in the convict colonies of Australia; on the decks of ships crisscrossing the globe.

### **Song: *Though money rules, and laws they rise***

*And it's become a crime to just survive*

*Jack Sheppard holds in memory*

*The people's thirst*

*The people's thirst for liberty*

### **Rioters with torches**

Fifty-six years after Jack was hanged, Newgate Prison, the scene of his most audacious escape, was set upon by the people of London.

That night, not just one, but hundreds of prisoners escaped.

### **Prisoners escape**

### **Prison on fire**

**Song**

*Fires of liberty are lighting up the dark*

*Fires of liberty are lighting up the dark*

*Fires of liberty are lighting up the dark*

*Every fire starts with a spark*

**Prison falls**

**End**